

CONTENTS *continued*

Alcohol-related birth defects: an update 638
Kenneth R. Warren and Richard J. Bast

Children of alcoholics: helping a vulnerable group 643
Migs Woodside

The role of alcohol in suicides in Erie County, NY, 1972-84..... 648
John W. Welte, Ernest L. Abel, and William Wieczorek

Alcohol and highway safety in a public health perspective 653
Frances Baker Dickman

Effects of legislative reform to reduce drunken driving and alcohol-related traffic fatalities 659
Ralph W. Hingson, Jonathan Howland, and Suzette Levenson

University students' drinking patterns and problems: examining the effects of raising the purchase age..... 667
Ruth C. Engs and David J. Hanson

An overview of prevention research: issues, answers, and new agendas 674
Jan Howard, Jane A. Taylor, Mary L. Ganikos, Harold D. Holder, Donald F. Godwin, and Elsie D. Taylor

Alcohol dependency prevention and early intervention 683
Peter E. Nathan

Genetics and biological markers of risk for alcoholism..... 690
Boris Tabakoff and Paula L. Hoffman

A biobehavioral research perspective on alcohol abuse and alcoholism 699
Joseph V. Brady

Research on alcohol problems from the perspective of changes—1940 to 1990. . . . 707
Robert Straus

DEPARTMENTS

PROGRAMS, PRACTICES, PEOPLE

Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to celebrate centennial, *CDR Steven R. Moore* — 1989 public health conference on records and statistics 715

NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS: DATA LINE..... 713-714

1988 SUBJECT AND AUTHOR INDEX 716-727

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION ... 712

COVER 3

Alcohol. A drug that can harm the body

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attention to the need for more knowledge on such questions as what people drink and how much, why and how some people abuse rather than use alcohol, and what problems are associated with different levels of drinking. They repeatedly identified a need to know more about the behavioral and social factors that cause people to consume alcohol as a necessary corollary to knowledge about how alcohol affects the body once it is consumed.

The Institute of Medicine report, while summarizing a vast amount of biological knowledge, notes that "the many ways in which people respond to alcohol, their various capacities to drink safely, and the relative risks they run for the development of alcohol-related problems pose major questions for research. These are complex phenomena, occurring at the junction of biologic, behavioral, and social forces" (2c). The report also repeatedly stresses the need to integrate biological and behavioral approaches in the conceptualization and design of research.

In their recognition of the need for truly integrative biological and behavioral research, Haggard and Jellinek were clearly ahead of their time. Even

though they established a multidisciplinary center of research at Yale in the 1940s, most of the research efforts there were parallel rather than integrated. The conceptual, ideological, and methodological barriers between disciplines were too strong to penetrate. Today, these barriers have already been diminished within the biological and within the social and behavioral sciences. It is often hard to distinguish between a biochemist and a microbiologist or between certain epidemiologists and sociologists. As we approach 1990, and the end of our half-century review of change in relation to alcohol problems in the United States, it seems clear that one goal for research on alcohol problems early in the next half-century must be a successful penetration of the biological-behavioral barrier.

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2. Institute of Medicine: Causes and consequences of alcohol problems: an agenda for research. National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 1987; (a) pp. 6-7; (b) p. 10; (c) p. 13.

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1988 SUBJECT AND AUTHOR INDEX

<i>Pages</i>	<i>Month of Issue</i>	<i>No.</i>
1-104.....	January-February.....	1
105-208.....	March-April.....	2
209-336.....	May-June.....	3
337-440.....	July-August.....	4
441-556.....	September-October.....	5
557-728.....	November-December.....	6

Key to Classification of Subject Index

- a Original article
- br Brief report
- e Editorial
- ltr Letter

This index to PUBLIC HEALTH REPORTS is divided into a subject index and an author index. The subject index has one or more entries for each item published. In addition to the subject headings, categorical headings include CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS, EDITORIALS, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, AND PUBLICATION REVIEWS.

SUBJECT INDEX

AGING

an aging nation presents new challenges to the health care system	e	1	workshop: hospital, community, and informal care for older persons	br	539
the challenge of aging societies—United States-Israel Cooperation in Health.....	br	515	workshop: resources for research in aging: special populations, longitudinal studies, tissue banks, research personnel	br	536
the challenge of combining clinical approaches with function in treating the elderly	a	528	AIDS		
creating a master's degree program in gerontology and geriatrics.....	a	526	a "call to arms" for health care workers	e	337
the economic cost of senile dementia in the United States	a	3	AIDS patients eligible for benefits under new Social Security regulation	br	327
educating health care providers to care for the elderly epidemiology and services for the aged	a	522	the American Medical Association and the war on AIDS.....	a	282
functional assessment as a model for clinical evaluation of geriatric patients	a	530	bibliography available on AIDS health services delivery and costs	br	327
the health of the elderly	br	437	containing the spread of HIV infection: a world health priority.....	a	221
using epidemiologic data to plan services for the elderly.....	a	520	cooperative groups to pool expertise in developing new approaches to HIV vaccines.....	br	436
workshop: Alzheimer's disease and other dementias ..	br	543	current CDC efforts to prevent and control human immunodeficiency virus infection and AIDS in the United States through information and education ..	a	255
workshop: forecasting the care needs of the elderly: methodology and limitations	br	541	the development of an AIDS vaccine: progress and promise.....	a	230
workshop: health promotion for the elderly.....	br	545	educating nursing students about quality care and safe practices in the AIDS epidemic	a	278
			the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the safety of the nation's blood supply	a	236
			the epidemiology of AIDS and its global impacts	br	437
			"We are your sons, your daughters . . ."	e	209
			forecasting the personal medical care costs of AIDS from 1988 through 1991	a	309
			governors asked by Bowen to share AIDS information	b	102
			HIV-AIDS transmission symbols	a	58
			HIV transmission to female sexual partners of HIV antibody-positive hemophiliacs	a	54
			HRSA AIDS curriculum conferences assist primary care health professionals.....	br	553
			in pursuit of the number one public health problem.. the Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences: formulating AIDS policy.....	a	289
			intravenous drug use and AIDS prevention.....	a	261
			issues related to care of AIDS patients addressed by task force report.....	br	326
			Labor, HHS urge health care employers to protect workers against hepatitis B and AIDS	br	99
			making fair decisions about financing care for persons with AIDS	a	305
			meeting the needs of people with AIDS: local initiatives and Federal support	a	293
			monitoring the levels and trends of HIV infection: the Public Health Service's HIV surveillance program .	a	213
			NAN—a national voice for community-based services to people with AIDS	a	299
			NCHS AIDS data	br	96
			New York State assesses spread of HIV	br	100
			new regional centers to support community efforts against AIDS.....	br	434
			the pathology of AIDS	a	246

progress in drug therapies for HIV infection	a	224	alcoholism treatment services systems: a health ser-	a	605
the role of the American Hospital Association in	a	273	vices research perspective	a	638
combating AIDS	a	242	alcohol-related birth defects: an update	a	597
the role of the FDA in the effort against AIDS	a	267	assessment of the potential for surveillance of alcohol-	a	597
role of the State health agencies in responding to	a	267	related casualties using National Hospital Discharge	a	597
AIDS	a	267	Survey data	a	597
Secretary Bowen sets department-wide pediatric HIV	br	325	control of stress and violent behavior: mid-course	a	38
disease initiative	br	325	review of the 1990 health objectives	br	436
study of Haitian boat people shows prevalence of	br	98	education campaign stresses treatability of depression	a	690
HBV and HIV markers	br	98	genetics and biological markers of risk for alcoholism	a	674
“Understanding AIDS” [reprinted brochure]	a	328	an overview of prevention research: issues, answers,	a	575
video for health care providers available on respond-	br	435	and new agendas	a	586
ing to the patient with HIV infection	br	435	a perspective on science and public health policy	a	586
“We are your sons, your daughters”	e	209	screening for alcoholism: techniques and issues	a	435
WHO estimates 300,000 AIDS cases by year’s end . . .	br	207	statistics on mental health service delivery systems	br	435
			compiled in NIH report	br	435
ALCOHOL			theories and models supporting current prevention	a	578
alcohol and highway safety: in a public health per-	a	653	approaches to alcohol problems among youth	a	592
spective	a	653	trends in alcohol-related morbidity and mortality	a	592
alcohol dependency pre vention and early intervention	a	683			
alcoholism research: delivering on the promise	a	569	ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE		
alcoholism treatment services systems: a health ser-	a	605	workshop: Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias . .	br	543
vices research perspective	a	605			
alcohol problem resources and services in State sup-	a	611	AMERICAN HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION		
ported programs during FY 1987	a	611	the role of the American Hospital Association in	a	273
alcohol-related birth defects: an update	a	638	combating AIDS	a	273
alcohol use	br	437			
assessment of the potential for surveillance of alcohol-	a	597	AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION		
related casualties using National Hospital Discharge	a	597	the American Medical Association and the war on	a	282
Survey data	a	597	AIDS	a	282
a behavioral research perspective on alcohol abuse	a	699			
and alcoholism	a	699	AREA RESOURCE FILE		
biological features of women’s alcohol use: a review .	a	628	the Area Resource File—a brief look	a	184
characteristics of drowning deaths in North Carolina .	a	406			
children of alcoholics: helping a vulnerable group	a	643	ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS		
drug use and illnesses among eighth grade students in	a	394	hypertension and related health issues among Asians	a	28
rural schools	a	394	and Pacific Islanders in California	a	28
the economic impact of alcohol abuse and alcoholism	a	564	population characteristics and health care needs of	a	18
effects of legislative reform to reduce drunken driving	a	659	Asian Pacific Americans	a	18
and alcohol-related traffic fatalities	a	659			
the “friend” that betrays	e	557	AZIDOTHYIMIDINE		
genetics and biological markers of risk for alcoholism	a	690	forecasting the personal medical care costs of AIDS	a	309
IHS workshops train community health workers in	br	207	from 1988 through 1991	a	309
nutritional problems of alcoholism treatment	br	207	progress in drug therapies for HIV infection	a	224
the Indian Health Service approach to alcoholism	a	621	the role of the FDA in the effort against AIDS	a	242
among American Indians and Alaska Natives	a	621			
an overview of prevention research: issues, answers,	a	674	BEHAVIOR		
and new agendas	a	674	a behavioral research perspective on alcohol abuse	a	699
a perspective on science and public health policy	a	575	and alcoholism	a	699
raising public awareness about the extent of alcohol-	a	559	control of stress and violent behavior: mid-course	a	38
related problems: an overview	a	559	review of the 1990 health objectives	a	366
research on alcohol problems from the perspective of	a	707	design, characteristics, and usefulness of State-based	a	366
changes—1940 to 1990	a	707	behavioral risk factor surveillance: 1981–87	a	376
the role of alcohol in suicides in Erie County, NY,	a	648	predictors of health practices within age-sex groups:	a	376
1972–84	a	648	national survey of personal health practices and	a	376
screening for alcoholism: techniques and issues	a	586	consequences, 1979	a	376
theories and models supporting current prevention	a	578			
approaches to alcohol problems among youth	a	578			
trends in alcohol-related morbidity and mortality	a	592			
university students’ drinking patterns and problems:	a	667			
examining the effect of raising the purchase age . . .	a	667			
ALCOHOL, DRUG ABUSE, AND MENTAL					
 HEALTH ADMINISTRATION					
alcoholism research: delivering on the promise	a	569			

BIRTHS

- alcohol-related birth defects: an update a 638
- discrepancies in birth weights between hospital records
and health department data for low birth weight
infants in New York City a 472
- life expectancy 1900-85 br 202
- life expectancy high br 100
- malpractice premiums and primary cesarean section
rates in New York and Illinois a 459
- U.S. fertility rate lowest ever while births increase for
the unmarried br 100
- validation of maternally reported birth weights among
46,637 Tennessee WIC Program participants a 143

BLOOD SUPPLY

- the effects of the AIDS epidemic on the safety of the
nation's blood supply a 236

CANCER

- cancer br 437
- cancer mortality among Mexican immigrants in the
United States a 195
- ethnic differences in smoking patterns: findings from
NHIS a 387
- tobacco and health: a review of the history and
suggestions for public health policy a 8

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

- cardiovascular disease br 437
- the role of physicians in a community-wide program
for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minne-
sota Heart Health Program a 360

CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

- the challenge of combining clinical approaches with
function in treating the elderly a 528
- workshop: forecasting the care needs of the elderly:
methodology and limitations br 541
- workshop: hospital, community, and informal care
for older persons br 539

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL

- assessing trends in mortality in 121 U.S. cities,
1970-79, from all causes and from pneumonia and
influenza a 120
- current CDC efforts to prevent and control human
immunodeficiency virus infection and AIDS in the
United States through information and education .. a 255
- design, characteristics, and usefulness of State-based
behavioral risk factor surveillance: 1981-87 a 366
- monitoring the levels and trends of HIV infection: the
Public Health Service's HIV surveillance program . a 213
- Secretary Bowen sets department-wide pediatric HIV
disease initiative br 325
- disease outbreaks—examples of community service... a 72

CHILDREN

- children of alcoholics: helping a vulnerable group... a 643
- cost-benefit analysis of safety belts in Texas school
buses a 479
- discrepancies in racial designations of school children
in Minneapolis a 485
- drug use and illnesses among eighth grade students in
rural schools a 394
- health and safety concerns of day care examined br 207
- injury fatalities among young children a 399
- program priorities of crippled children's agencies: a
survey a 77
- Secretary Bowen sets department-wide pediatric HIV
disease initiative br 325
- smoking and children e 105
- study tests lowering cholesterol in children through
diet br 204
- use and sources of payment for health and community
services for children with impaired mobility a 411

CHOLESTEROL

- high incidence of elevated cholesterol levels found by
local screening program br 436
- the role of physicians in a community-wide program
for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minne-
sota Heart Health Program a 360
- study tests lowering cholesterol in children through
diet br 204

COMMISSIONED CORPS

- Public Health Service's Commissioned Corps to cele-
brate centennial br 715

COMMUNITY SERVICE

- NAN—a national voice for community-based services
to persons with AIDS a 299
- training public health students to investigate disease
outbreaks—examples of community service a 72
- use and sources of payment for health and community
services for children with impaired mobility a 411

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

- AAPHD calls for papers for 1988 annual meeting ... 103
- NCHS data users conference scheduled for July 1988 323
- 1989 public health conference on records and statis-
tics br 715
- VIIth International Pneumoconioses Conference
scheduled for Pittsburgh 101

CONTRACEPTIVES

- are condom instructions readable? results of a read-
ability study a 355
- family planning for teens: strategies for improving
outreach and service delivery in public health set-
tings a 422

CRIPPLED CHILDREN'S AGENCIES

program priorities of crippled children's agencies: a survey	a	77
use and sources of payment for health and community services for children with impaired mobility	a	411

DATA BASES AND DATA FILES

family public use data tape on health care expenditures available to users	br	97
MATCH: a maternal and child health information network	a	147
NCHS data line for 1987	br	549
new NCHS public use data tapes	br	202
1985 vital statistics data tapes	br	203

DENTAL HEALTH

NIDR—40 years of research advances in dental health	a	493
---	---	-----

DROWNING

characteristics of drowning deaths in North Carolina	a	406
--	---	-----

DRUG ABUSE

a continuing outbreak of hepatitis A linked with intravenous drug abuse in Multnomah County.....	a	452
drug use and illnesses among eighth grade students in rural schools	a	394
intravenous drug use and AIDS prevention.....	a	261

DRUG THERAPY

progress in drug therapies for HIV infections	a	224
the role of the FDA in the effort against AIDS.....	a	242

ECONOMICS, HEALTH

cost-benefit analysis of safety belts in Texas school buses	a	479
a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women	a	83
the economic cost of senile dementia in the United States, 1985	a	3
the economic impact of alcohol abuse and alcoholism	a	564
estimates of incidence and costs of intestinal infectious diseases in the United States.....	a	107
family public use data tape on health care expenditures available to users	br	97
forecasting the personal medical care costs of AIDS from 1988 through 1991	a	309
making fair decisions about financing care for persons with AIDS	a	305
malpractice premiums and primary cesarean section rates in New York and Illinois.....	a	459
use and sources of payment for health and community services for children with impaired mobility	a	411

EDITORIALS

an aging nation presents new challenges to the health care system		1
---	--	---

a "call to arms" for health care workers		337
the "friend" that betrays		557
smoking and children		105
to the readers of <i>Public Health Reports</i>		106
a vital concern		441
"We are your sons, your daughters . . .".....		209

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

critical professional manpower shortage seen in environmental health.....	br	434
hospital administrators urged to implement nonsmoking policies.....	br	556
observations on work force and training needs for assessing environmental health risks	a	348
public forums explain New York's quest for radioactive waste site	br	102
toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for the year 1990	a	342

FAMILY PLANNING

family planning for teens: strategies for improving outreach and service delivery in public health settings	a	422
---	---	-----

FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

the role of the FDA in the effort against AIDS.....	a	242
telephone hotline taking questions on safe food handling and preparation	br	435

GENETIC COUNSELING

genetic counseling in sickle-cell anemia: experiences with couples at risk	a	174
--	---	-----

GERIATRIC FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT

functional assessment as a model for clinical evaluation of geriatric patients	a	530
--	---	-----

HEALTH CARE

an aging nation presents new challenges to the health care system	e	1
the Area Resource File—a brief look	a	184
hard choices in public health	a	339
health problems and use of services at two urban American Indian clinics.....	a	88
a health survey of Klamath Indian elders 30 years after the loss of tribal status	a	166
low-income person's access to health care: NMCUES Medicaid data	a	507
population characteristics and health care needs of Asian Pacific Americans.....	a	18

HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

consortium building among local health departments in northwest Illinois	a	500
family planning for teens: strategies for improving outreach and service delivery in public health settings	a	422

high incidence of elevated cholesterol levels found by local screening program br 436

HEALTH EDUCATION

an aging nation presents new challenges to the health care system e 1
are condom instructions readable? results of a readability study..... a 355
a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women a 83
current CDC efforts to prevent and control human immunodeficiency virus infection and AIDS in the United States through information and education.. a 255
education campaign stresses treatability of depression br 436
hard choices in public health a 339
high incidence of elevated cholesterol levels found by local screening program br 436
intravenous drug use and AIDS prevention..... a 261
NAN—a national voice for community-based services to persons with AIDS a 299
population characteristics and health care needs of Asian Pacific Americans a 18
raising public awareness about the extent of alcohol-related problems: an overview a 559
telephone hotline taking questions on safe food handling and preparation br 435

HEALTH MANPOWER

the Area Resources File—a brief look a 184
critical professional manpower shortage seen in environmental health..... br 434
factors affecting the supply of minority physicians in 2000..... a 178
preparing public health leaders for the 1990s a 443
Secretary Bowen appoints commission to improve nursing recruiting and retention nationwide br 434

HEALTH POLICY

AIDS patients eligible for benefits under new Social Security regulation br 327
the American Medical Association and the war on AIDS..... a 282
the effects of legislative reform to reduce drunken driving and alcohol-related traffic fatalities br 659
hospital administrators urged to implement nonsmoking policies..... br 556
the Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences: formulating AIDS policy..... a 289
issues related to care of AIDS patients addressed by task force report..... br 320
making fair decisions about financing care for persons with AIDS a 305
a perspective on science and public health policy a 575
PEW doctoral programs in health policy recruits its third class..... br 103
tobacco and health: a review of the history and suggestions for public health policy a 8

HEALTH PROFESSIONS EDUCATION AND TRAINING

a "call to arms" for health care workers e 337
after Chernobyl—how U.S. physicians respond to radioactive fallout a 128
the American Medical Association and the war on AIDS..... a 282
creating a master's degree program in gerontology and geriatrics..... a 526
educating health care providers to care for the elderly a 522
educating nursing students about quality care and safe practices in the AIDS epidemic a 278
HRSA AIDS curriculum conferences assist primary care health professionals..... br 553
IHS Fellows Program aimed at lowering injuries, deaths of Indians, Alaska Natives..... br 204
IHS workshops train community health workers in nutritional problems of alcoholism treatment..... br 207
improving disease reporting in Los Angeles County: trial and results..... a 415
meeting the needs of people with AIDS: local initiatives and Federal support a 293
nutrition and counseling publications offered..... br 101
observations on work force and training needs for assessing environmental health risks..... a 348
PEW doctoral program in health policy recruits its third class..... br 103
preparing and presenting an introductory course on motor vehicle injury..... a 153
preparing public health leaders for 1990s a 443
primary care Federal grant support influences career choices, study shows br 102
report surveys State laws and regulations for health professionals br 101
the role of the American Hospital Association in combating AIDS..... a 273
the role of physicians in a community-wide program for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minnesota Heart Health Program a 360
role of State health agencies in responding to AIDS.. a 267
training public health students to investigate disease outbreaks—examples of community service a 72
WHO book describes community-oriented medical school education br 205

HEALTH PROMOTION

design, characteristics, and usefulness of State-based behavioral risk factor surveillance: 1981-87 a 366
education campaign stresses treatability of depression br 436
how people obtain their health information—a survey in two Pennsylvania counties..... a 189
new reports on health promotion and disease prevention br 433
workshop: health promotion for the elderly br 545

HEALTH RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION

the Area Resource File—a brief look a 184
educating health care providers to care for the elderly a 522
health and safety concerns of day care examined br 207
HRSA AIDS curriculum conferences assist primary care health professionals..... br 553

HRSA contract continues National Organ Procurement transplantation network	br	100
HRSA grants to help community health centers to help the homeless	br	206
MATCH: a maternal and child health information network	a	147
meeting the needs of people with AIDS: local initiatives and Federal support	a	293
new HRSA office focuses on quality assurance activities	br	438
nutrition and counseling publications offered	br	101
primary care Federal grant support influences career choices, study shows	br	102

HEALTH SERVICES UTILIZATION

a health survey of Klamath Indian elders 30 years after the loss of tribal status	a	166
current patterns in health care utilization	br	96
family public use data tape on health care expenditures available to users	br	97
health problems and use of services at two urban American Indian clinics	a	88

HEARING

hearing sensitivity in farmers	a	61
--------------------------------------	---	----

HEMOPHILIACS

HIV transmission to female sexual partners of HIV antibody-positive hemophiliacs	a	54
--	---	----

HEPATITIS A AND B

a continuing outbreak of hepatitis A linked with intravenous drug abuse in Multnomah County	a	452
Labor, HHS urge health care employers to protect workers against hepatitis B and AIDS	br	99
study of Haitian boat people shows prevalence of HBV and HIV markers	br	98

HIGHWAY SAFETY

alcohol and highway safety in a public health perspective	a	653
cost-benefit analysis of safety belts in Texas school buses	a	479
injury fatalities among young children	a	399
preparing and presenting an introductory course on motor vehicle safety	a	153

HYPERTENSION

hypertension and related health issues among Asians and Pacific Islanders in California	a	28
---	---	----

HYSTERECTOMIES

trends in hysterectomies	br	97
--------------------------------	----	----

IMMIGRANTS

cancer mortality among Mexican immigrants in the United States	a	195
--	---	-----

study of Haitian boat people shows prevalence of HBV and HIV markers	br	98
--	----	----

IMMUNIZATION

measles outbreaks in religious groups exempt from immunization laws	a	49
risk for measles related to immunization status in two Tucson high schools	a	162

INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE

a health survey of Klamath Indian elders 30 years after the loss of tribal status	a	166
health problems and use of services at two urban American Indian clinics	a	88
IHS Fellows Program aimed at lowering injuries, deaths of Indians, Alaska Natives	br	204
IHS workshops train community health workers in nutritional problems of alcoholism treatment	br	207
the Indian Health Service approach to alcoholism among American Indians and Alaska Natives	a	621
Indian Health Service to be seventh PHS agency	br	103

INFLUENZA

assessing trends in mortality in 121 U.S. cities, 1970-79, from all causes and from pneumonia and influenza	a	120
---	---	-----

INJURY

cost-benefit analysis of safety belts in Texas school buses	a	479
injury fatalities among young children	a	399
preparing and presenting an introductory course on motor vehicle injury	a	153

INTESTINAL INFECTIOUS DISEASES

estimates of incidence and costs of intestinal infectious diseases in the United States	a	107
---	---	-----

KIDNEY AND URINARY TRACT DISEASES

six new research centers study kidney and urinary tract diseases	br	206
--	----	-----

LEARNING DISABILITIES

uniform definition proposed for learning disabled	br	205
---	----	-----

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dr. Windom replies [to letter about reducing medical malpractice]	338
reducing medical malpractice: tort law reform is not the key	338

MALPRACTICE

Dr. Windom replies [to letter about reducing medical malpractice]	ltr	338
---	-----	-----

primary cesarean section rates and malpractice premiums in New York and Illinois	a	459
reducing medical malpractice: tort law reform is not the key	ltr	338

MATERNAL AND INFANT HEALTH

economic status differences in infant mortality by cause of death	a	135
health and safety concerns of day care examined	br	207
infant mortality rate down	br	100
MATCH: a maternal and child health information network	a	147
OMCH promotes breastfeeding through grants to 16 varied projects	br	550
validation of maternally reported birth weights among 46,637 Tennessee WIC program participants	a	143
a vital concern	e	441

MEASLES

measles outbreaks in religious groups exempt from immunization laws	a	49
risk for measles related to immunization status in two Tucson high schools	a	162

MENTAL DISORDERS

education campaign stresses treatability of depression statistics on mental health service delivery systems compiled in NIMH report	br	436
	br	435

MEXICAN AMERICANS

cancer mortality among Mexican immigrants in the United States	a	195
ethnic differences in smoking patterns: findings from NHIS	a	387

MINNESOTA HEART HEALTH PROGRAM

the role of physicians in a community-wide program for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minnesota Heart Health Program	a	360
---	---	-----

MORBIDITY REPORT

improving disease reporting in Los Angeles County: trial and results	a	415
--	---	-----

MORTALITY

assessing trends in mortality in 121 U.S. cities, 1970-79, from all causes and from pneumonia and influenza	a	120
cancer mortality among Mexican immigrants in the United States	a	195
characteristics of drowning deaths in North Carolina	a	406
death rate at all-time high	br	100
economic status differences in infant mortality by cause of death	a	135
infant mortality rate down	br	100
injury fatalities among young children	a	399
the National Death Index	br	432

NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS

assessing trends in mortality in 121 U.S. cities, 1970-79, from all causes and from pneumonia and influenza	a	120
cancer mortality among Mexican immigrants in the United States	a	195
current patterns in health care utilization	br	96
death rate at all-time high	br	100
family public use data tape on health care expenditures available to users	br	97
height and weight update	br	202
infant mortality rate down	br	100
instructions to users [of National Death Index]	br	432
life expectancy 1900-85	br	202
life expectancy high	br	100
National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics report for 1987	br	322
the National Death Index	br	432
National Health Care Survey	br	321
NCHS AIDS data	br	96
NCHS data line for 1987	br	549
NCHS data users conference scheduled for July 1988	br	323
new guide to vital records	br	97
new handbooks issued	br	549
new NCHS public use data tapes	br	202
new NCHS publications	br	433
new reports on health promotion and disease prevention	br	433
1985 marriage and divorce statistics	br	433
1985 vital statistics data tapes	br	203
1987 catalog of publications now available	br	549
1986 hospitalization report	br	202
other new publications	br	549
overview of NHANES III	br	549
structure of the NDI	br	432
the surveys [with questions concerning alcohol use] ..	br	713
survey plans	br	96
trends in hysterectomies	br	97
U.S. fertility rate lowest ever while births increase for the unmarried	br	100
the Vital Registration System	br	714

NATIONAL HEALTH GOALS

control of stress and violent behavior: mid-course review of the 1990 health objectives	a	38
toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for the year 1990	a	342

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE

intravenous drug use and AIDS prevention	a	261
--	---	-----

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

cooperative groups to pool expertise in developing new approaches to HIV vaccines	br	436
the development of an AIDS vaccine: progress and promise	a	230
NIDR—40 years of research advances in dental health	a	493
progress in drug therapies for HIV infection	a	224

Secretary Bowen sets department-wide pediatric HIV disease initiative	br	325
toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for 1990.....	a	342

NATIVE AMERICANS

a health survey of Klamath Indian elders 30 years after the loss of tribal status	a	166
health problems and use of services at two urban American Indian clinics.....	a	88
IHS Fellows Program aimed at lowering injuries, deaths of Indians, Alaska Natives.....	br	204
IHS workshops train community health workers in nutritional problems of alcoholism treatment.....	br	207
the Indian Health Service approach to alcoholism among American Indians and Alaska Natives	a	621
Native American safety poster prize winners	br	438

NURSES

educating nursing students about quality care and safe practices in the AIDS epidemic	a	278
Davis elected chair of NLN home care subsidiary....	br	207
Secretary Bowen appoints commission to improve nurse recruiting and retention nationwide	br	434

PERSONAL HEALTH PRACTICES

design, characteristics, and usefulness of State-based behavioral risk factor surveillance: 1981-87	a	366
predictors of health practices within age-sex groups: national survey of person health practices and consequences, 1979.....	a	376

PEW DOCTORAL PROGRAM

Pew doctoral program in health policy recruits its third class.....	br	103
---	----	-----

PNEUMONIA

assessing trends in mortality in 121 U.S. cities, 1970-79, from all causes and from pneumonia and influenza.....	a	120
--	---	-----

PREGNANCY

a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women	a	83
---	---	----

PREVENTION

alcohol dependency prevention and early intervention	a	683
a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women	a	83
current CDC efforts to prevent and control human immunodeficiency virus infection and AIDS in the United States through information and education ..	a	255
the development of an AIDS vaccine: progress and promise.....	a	230
the good news is . . . a health diet may reduce cancer risk		

cover 3, January-February

high incidence of elevated cholesterol levels found by local screening program	br	436
intravenous drug use and AIDS prevention.....	a	261
Native American safety poster prize winners	br	438
new reports on health promotion and disease prevention	br	433
an overview of [alcoholism] prevention research: issues, answers, and new agendas	a	674
progress in drug therapies for HIV infection	a	224
the role of physicians in a community-wide program for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minnesota Heart Health Program	a	360
telephone hotline taking questions on safe food handling and preparation	br	435
theories and models supporting current prevention approaches to alcohol problems among youth	a	578
tobacco and health: a review of the history and suggestions for public health policy	a	8
toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for the year 1990	a	342

PUBLICATION REVIEWS

Adults' Health Practices in the United States and Canada.....		433
Advance Report of Final Natality, 1985		100
Annual Summary of Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: United States, 1986		100
Diet, Nutrition and Cancer Prevention: The Good News.....		
	cover 3, January-February	
Evaluating the Environmental Health Work Force ...		434
Health of Children in Day Care—Public Health Profiles.....		207
Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, 1985.....		433
Health United States 1987		
	cover 3, March-April	
Innovative Schools for Health Personnel.....		205
Learning Disabilities: A Report to the U.S. Congress		205
Mental Health, United States, 1987		435
NCHS Data Line, 1987		549
Nutrition and Adolescent Pregnancy: A Selected Annotated Bibliography		101
Report of the Intragovernmental Task Force on AIDS Health Care Delivery		326
State Regulation of the Health Occupations and Professions: 1986-87		326
Standard Terminology for Reporting of Reproductive Health Statistics		441

RACIAL DESIGNATIONS

discrepancies in racial designations of school children in Minneapolis	a	485
--	---	-----

RADIATION

after Chernobyl—how U.S. physicians respond to radioactive fallout	a	128
public forums explain New York's quest for radioactive waste site	br	102
toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for the year 1990	a	342

new guide to vital records.....	br	97
validation of maternally reported birth weights among 46,637 Tennessee WIC program participants	a	143

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH STATISTICS

measles outbreaks in religious groups exempt from immunization laws	a	49
discrepancies in birth weights between hospital records and health department data for low birth weight infants in New York City	a	472
standard terminology for reporting of reproductive health statistics in the United States	a	464
a vital concern	e	441

SAFETY BELTS

cost-benefit analysis of safety belts in Texas school buses	a	479
---	---	-----

SAFETY POSTER PRIZE WINNERS

Native Americans safety poster prize winners.....	br	438,
cover 3, May-June		

SENILE DEMENTIA

the economic cost of senile dementia in the United States, 1985	a	3
workshop: Alzheimer's disease and other dementias ..	br	453

SICKLE-CELL ANEMIA

genetic counseling in sickle-cell anemia: experiences with couples at risk	a	174
--	---	-----

SMOKING

a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women	a	83
drug use and illnesses among eighth grade students in rural schools	a	394
employee smoking behavior changes and attitudes following a restrictive policy on worksite smoking in a large company.....	a	115
estimates of future adverse health effects of smoking in China	br	552
ethnic differences in smoking patterns: findings from NHIS	a	387
hospital administrators urged to implement nonsmoking policies.....	br	556
the role of physicians in a community-wide program for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minnesota Heart Health Program	a	360
smoking and children	e	105
tobacco and health: a review of the history and suggestions for public health policy	a	8

SMOKING CESSATION

a cost-effectiveness analysis of self-help smoking cessation methods for pregnant women	a	83
hospital administrators urged to implement nonsmoking policies.....	br	556

SOVIET UNION

after Chernobyl—how U.S. physicians respond to radioactive fallout	a	128
--	---	-----

STATE HEALTH AGENCIES

role of State health agencies in responding to AIDS..	a	267
---	---	-----

STRESS

control of stress and violent behavior: mid-course review of the 1990 health objectives.....	a	38
--	---	----

SURVEYS

a health survey of Klamath Indian elders 30 years after the loss of tribal status	a	166
after Chernobyl—how U.S. physicians respond to radioactive fallout	a	128
drug use and illnesses among eighth grade students in rural schools	a	394
design, characteristics, and usefulness of State-based behavioral risk factor surveillance: 1981-87	a	366
discrepancies in racial designations of school children in Minneapolis	a	485
employee smoking behavior changes and attitudes following a restrictive policy on worksite smoking in a large company.....	a	115
estimates of incidence and costs of intestinal infectious diseases in the United States.....	a	107
ethnic differences in smoking patterns: findings from NHIS	a	387
health problems and use of services at two urban American Indian clinics.....	a	88
how people obtain their health information—a survey in two Pennsylvania counties	a	189
hypertension and related health issues among Asians and Pacific Islanders in California	a	28
improving disease reporting in Los Angeles County: trial and results.....	a	415
low-income persons' access to health care: NMCUES Medicaid data	a	507
monitoring the levels and trends of HIV infection: the Public Health Service's HIV surveillance program .	a	213
1985 National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey	br	203
National Health Care Survey	br	321
National Health Interview Survey, 1986	br	203
National Hospital Discharge Survey, 1986	br	203
overview of NHANES III.....	br	548
predictors of health practices within age-sex groups: national survey of personal health practices and consequences, 1979.....	a	376
program priorities of crippled children's agencies: a survey	a	77
the role of physicians in a community-wide program for prevention of cardiovascular disease: the Minnesota Heart Health Program	a	360
survey plans [NCHS]	br	96
use and sources of payment for health and community services for children with impaired mobility	a	411

TOBACCO

tobacco and health: a review of the history and suggestions for public health policy a 8

TOXIC AGENT AND RADIATION

toxic agent and radiation control: progress toward objectives for the nation for the year 1990 a 342

VIOLENCE

control of stress and violent behavior: mid-course review of the 1990 health objectives a 38

AUTHOR INDEX

Abel, Ernest L. a 648
 Adler, William H. br 536
 Aitken, Sherrie S. a 592
 Alexander, Cheryl S. a 394
 Allen, John P. a 586
 Amatetti, Sharon a 578
 Anda, Robert F. a 366
 Anderson, Priscilla N. a 348
 Andriote, John-Manuel a 299
 Archer, Douglas L. a 107
 Aronoff, Remy a 178
 Atakent, Yu cel S. a 472

Bailey, Dorothy a 293
 Bain, Daniel a 500
 Baron, Roy C. a 120
 Barzilai, David a 526,
 br 536
 Bast, Richard J. a 638
 Beck, John br 539
 Begley, Charles E. a 479
 Benford, M. Sue a 147
 Berberich, Norbert J. a 348
 Besdine, Richard W. a 530
 Biddinger, Paul W. a 406
 Biddle, Andrea K. a 479
 Binkin, Nancy J. a 143
 Blackburn, Henry a 360
 Bowen, G. Stephen a 255
 Bowen, Otis R. a 211,
 a 559
 Brady, Joseph V. a 699
 Brandt, Edward N., Jr. a 339
 Brannon, Elizabeth br 550
 Braveman, Norman br 543
 Broder, Samuel a 224
 Browning, J. A. a 162
 Burke, Thomas R. a 564
 Burns, Thomas R. a 621
 Bussell, Kelly E. a 120
 Butler, John A. a 411
 Butynski, William a 611

Calhoun, Chanelle R. a 115
 Canova, Diana M. a 611
 Cartwright, William S. a 3

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

containing the spread of HIV infection: a world health priority a 221
 global health trends profiled in WHO statistics br 437
 WHO book describes community-oriented medical school education br 205
 WHO estimates 300,000 AIDS cases by year's end ... br 207

WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN PROGRAM

validation of maternally reported birth weights among 46,637 Tennessee WIC program participants a 143

Cefalo, Robert C. e 441
 Christoffel, Tom. a 153
 Ciacco, Katherine H. a 115
 Cohen, Gene D. br 543
 Cone, Edward J. br 98
 Connell, C. M. a 189
 Coulson, Anne H. a 355
 Crank, John a 387
 Crawford, Blake L. br 434
 Crawford, C. O. a 189
 Crook, Thomas br 543
 Curb, David br 545
 Curran, James W. a 213
 Cutter, Gary R. a 83

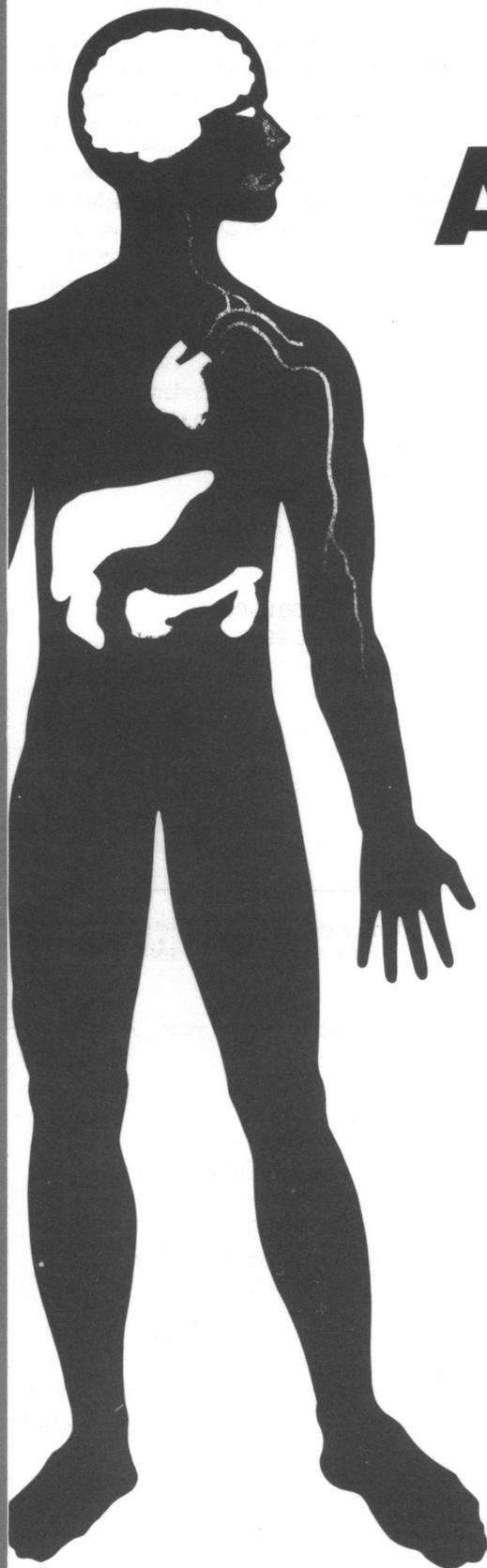
Danon, David br 536
 Davidson, Ezra C., Jr. e 441
 Davies, A. Michael a 516,
 br 545
 DeRoos, Roger L. a 348
 Dicker, Richard C. a 120
 Dickman, Frances Baker a 653
 Dondero, Timothy J., Jr. a 213
 Doran, Mary a 49
 Dowd, J. E. br 541
 Drotman, D. Peter a 255
 Dufour, Mary a 597

Eckhardt, Michael J. a 586
 Eddy, Phyllis a 621
 Eichler, Richard J. a 77
 Empereur, Raymond a 500
 Engs, Ruth C. a 667
 Epstein, Jay S. a 236
 Evans, Dennis br 545
 Ewart, Shirley a 166

Fannin, Shirley, L. a 415
 Fauci, Anthony S. a 224,
 a 230
 Feldman, Jacob J. a 399
 Ferrara, Angelo a 472
 Fingerhut, Lois A. a 399
 Fischinger, Peter J. a 230
 Frank, Myron J. a 143

Friedland, Joan M.	a	489	Kawata, Paul Akio	a	299
Funkhouser, Judith E.	a	578	Kilpatrick, Nancy S.	br	553
Galinsky, David	br	539,	Kingsley, Lawrence A.	a	54
br 541, br 543			Klassen, Ann C.	a	394
Ganikos, Mary L.	a	674	Kleinman, Joel C.	a	399
Garthright, Wallace E.	a	107	Kolbe, Lloyd J.	a	255
Gayle, Helene D.	a	143	Komorwska, Danuta	a	452
Gentry, Eileen M.	a	366	Koop, C. Everett	a	221
Gibbons, Carol M.	a	115	Kottke, Thomas E.	a	360
Gillum, Richard F.	a	485	Kovar, Mary Grace	br	541
Godwin, Donald F.	a	674	Kvenberg, John E.	a	107
Golden, Patricia	br	713	Lalley, Thomas L.	a	38
Goldstein, Ellie J. C.	a	489	Lange, W. Robert	br	98
Gomez-Marin, Orlando	a	485	Lebowitz, Barry	br	536
Goodwin, Frederick K.	a	569	Leonard, Alvin R.	a	28
Gordis, Enoch.	a	575	Levenson, Suzette.....	a	659
Grant, Bridget F.	a	592	Levinson, Barry	a	472
Greenland, Sander	a	489	Lewis, Jessica H.	a	54
Grimm, Richard, Jr.	a	360	Lin-Fu, Jane S.	a	18
Gupta, Phalguni	a	54	Lindsey, Bryan K.	a	252
Habib, Jack	br	539,	Little, George A.	e	441
br 541			Lowenstein, Ariela	a	526
Habot, Beni.	br	543	Luepker, Russell V.	a	360
Hadler, James L.	a	72	Macher, Abe M.	a	246
Hanson, David J.	a	667	Malloy, Michael H.	a	399
Hazzard, DeWitt	br	536	Mann, Jonathan	a	221
Helgerson, Steven D.	a	72,	Manton, Kenneth		541
a 115			March, C. Ralph	a	49
Hellinger, Fred J.	a	309	Markowitz, Lauri E.	a	49
Hennekens, Charles H.	br	545	Mason, James O.	a	255
Herndon, Joy L.	a	120	Mason, Russell D.	a	621
Herz, Elicia J.	a	422	Matheny, Samuel C.	br	553
Hingson, Ralph W.	a	659	Maugans, Betty	a	348
Hirschfeld, Miriam J.	br	545	McCarthy, Carol	a	273
Hoffman, Paula L.	a	690	McCombie, S. C.	a	162
Hogelin, Gary C.	a	366	Menczel, Jacob	br	539
Holden, Janet A.	a	153	Mittelmark, Maurice B.	a	360
Holder, Harold D.	a	674	Moore, Steven R.	br	715
Hopkins, Richard S.	a	49	Morisky, Donald E.	a	355
Hotchkiss, William S.	a	282	Nathan, Peter E.	a	683
Howard, Jan	a	674	Neal-Cooper, Florence.....	a	174
Howell, Embry M.	a	507	Nesbit, Toma A.	a	500
Howland, Jonathan	a	659	Nieburg, Phillip	a	143
Hu, Teh-Wei	a	3	Noble, Gary R.	a	255
Huang, Lien-Fu	a	3	Noble, John.	a	592
Igra, Amnon	a	28	Novotny, Thomas E.	a	49,
Ireys, Henry T.	a	77	br 552		
Jackson, M. Yvonne	br	204	Oliver, Eugene	br	543
Jacobs, Joan	a	38	Olshansky, S. J.	br	541
Jaffe, Jerome H.	br	98	Olson, Lynn M.	a	422
Jekel, James F.	a	72	Omenn, Gilbert S.	a	348
Jennings, Charles E.	a	49	Orthofer, Joseph.....	a	500
Jensen, Donald V.	a	61	Ostfeld, Adrian.....	a	520
Johnson, Bekki J.	a	489	Palfrey, Judith S.	a	411
Johnson, Elaine M.	a	578	Pappaioanou, Marguerite	a	213
Johnson, Sandie	a	578	Parron, Delores	a	38
Joos, Sandra K.	a	166	Patetta, Michael J.	a	406
Kahana, Boaz	br	536	Paulsen, Gregory	br	539
Karlovich, Raymond S.	a	61	Petersen, Lyle R.	a	115
			Peto, Richard	br	552

Petricciani, John C.	a	236	Stoddard, Anne M.	a	128
Pitchford, Karen C.	a	115	Strassburg, Marc A.	a	415
Platt, Laurence J.	a	147	Straus, Robert.....	a	707
Plichta, Denise T.	a	489	Sundwall, David N.	a	293,
Porter, B. W.	a	162	a 522		
Powell, Anita	br	713	Suzman, Richard	br	541
Prineas, Ronald J.	a	485	Swanson, David A.	a	135
Rabinowitz, Marian	a	528,	Tabakoff, Boris	a	690
br 543			Taylor, Elsie D.	a	674
Radebaugh, Teresa S.	br	543	Taylor, James O.	br	545
Ragni, Margaret V.	a	54	Taylor, Jane A.	a	674
Rakowski, William.....	a	376	Taylor, Timothy L.	a	88
Rall, David P.	a	342	Tebben, Marian Priest.....	e	106
Ramirez, Sharon L.	br	321	Thier, Samuel O.	a	289
Ravenholt, R. T.	a	58	Towle, Leland H.	a	597
Rawlings, Ellen R.	br	100,	Town, Wynona A.	br	207
br 102, br 206			Traugott, Michael.....	br	536
Ray, C. G.	a	162	Tweed, Ted	a	61
Reis, Janet S.	a	422	Van Ness, Paula.....	a	255
Remington, Patrick L.	a	366	Van Nostrand, Joan	br	539
Rentos, P. G.	a	348	Walch, Charlotte	br	550
Rhoades, Everett R.	a	621	Walker, Deborah Klein	a	411
Richland, Jordan H.	a	267	Wallen, Jacqueline.....	a	586,
Richwald, Gary A.	a	355,	a 605		
a 489			Wamsley, Maria A.	a	355
Rinaldo, Charles R.	a	54	Warner, Kenneth E.	a	83
Rock, Steven M.	a	459	Warren, Kenneth R.	a	638
Roemer, Milton I.	a	443	Wassilak, Steven G. F.	a	49
Rogers, Richard G.	a	387	Weiss, Billie P.	a	415
Roman, Paul M.	a	628	Weiss, Robin.....	a	289
Roper, William L.	a	305	Welte, John W.	a	648
Rosenbach, Joan K.....	a	522	White, Lon	br	543
Rosenberg, Mark L.	a	38,	Wicks, Jerry W.		135
a 255			Wieczorek, William		648
Rosenwaike, Ira	a	195	Wiley, Terry L.	a	61
Samuels, Michael E.	a	221	Williams, Gerald D.	a	592
Santini, Kathi A.	br	321,	Williamson, David F.	a	366
br 433			Winder, Alvin E.	a	128
Schade, Charles P.	a	452	Windom, Robert E.	e	1,
Schubert, Max.....	br	436	e 105, e 106, e 209, e 337, ltr 338, e 441, e 557		
Schuster, Charles R.	a	261	Windsor, Richard A.	a	83
Scott, Robert B.	a	174	Winkenwerder, William.....	a	305
Sheridan, Patricia G.	a	493	Winograd, Carol Hutner.....	br	539
Silverman, Morton M.	a	38	Wolfson, Farrell.....	br	321
Simpson, Clay E., Jr.	a	178	Wolfe, Sidney M.	ltr	338
Singer, Judith	a	411	Woodside, Migs	a	643
Sis, Frank	br	326,	Worrell, R. D.	a	162
br 438			Wynder, Ernst L.	a	8
Smith, Eva M.	a	621	Yip, Ray.....	a	143
Smith, Jack C.	a	38	Young, Frank E.	a	242
Smith, Meredith Y.	a	366	Zimmer, James.....	br	539
Smith, Richard J.	br	204	Zobeck, Terry S.	a	592
Smith, Sandra	br	96,			
br 202, br 321, br 432, br 548					
Spero, Jeannette R.	a	278			
Spero, Joel A.	a	54			
Sprott, Richard L.	br	536			
Stambler, Howard V.	a	184			
Stanitis, Mary Anne.....	a	128			
Stavig, Gordon R.	a	28			
Stinson, Frederick S.	a	592,			
a 597					
Stockwell, Edward G.	a	135			



ALCOHOL

A Drug That Can Harm the Body

Alcohol is a drug. It can be dangerous. It can be habit-forming. It can harm health. Here's what alcohol can do to different parts of the body.

BRAIN

Alcohol may reduce the flow of oxygen to the brain. Fuzzy thinking, staggering, and confused speech can result. With increased amounts, alcohol can cause brain damage, unconsciousness, or death. Alcohol even in small amounts makes it difficult to get a good night's sleep.

EYES

Alcohol relaxes eye muscles, making it difficult to focus on anything. The result can be blurred vision. In large amounts, alcohol can reduce the ability to see to the right and left.

NOSE, TONGUE

Alcohol, even in small amounts, can reduce the ability to smell and taste.

HEART

Alcohol can increase the workload of the heart. Heavy use of alcohol over a period of years can damage the main heart muscle. Alcohol can also cause the heart to beat irregularly. An irregular heartbeat can lead to heart failure in some cases. Alcohol can raise blood pressure.

LIVER

Alcohol over a period of time can cause the liver to become swollen and tender. This can keep the liver from working properly and bring on diseases that can kill. An alcohol-damaged liver can also reduce the production of substances that clot blood and help stop bleeding.

STOMACH

Alcohol irritates the lining of the stomach and can cause vomiting. Repeated use can sometimes cause sores called ulcers. Alcohol can lead to cancer of the esophagus, the tube that takes food to the stomach.

PANCREAS

Alcohol can cause the lining of the pancreas to swell. The swelling can block off the passage to the small intestine. Chemicals needed in the small intestine to aid digestion cannot get through. The blocked chemicals begin to digest the pancreas itself, causing pain, vomiting, and possibly death.

KIDNEYS

Alcohol can stop the kidneys from keeping the right balance of fluid in the body. Too much fluid in the body can cause a rise in blood pressure.

VEINS, ARTERIES

Alcohol widens blood vessels near the surface of the skin, causing a loss of heat from the body. Swollen arteries in the head can put pressure on nerves and cause headaches.

BLOOD

Alcohol reduces the ability of the bone marrow to make red blood cells, causing a condition called anemia. A person with anemia feels weak and tired. Alcohol also reduces the number of white blood cells and their ability to fight infection. Alcohol interferes with normal blood clotting.

SKIN

Alcohol seems to worsen skin diseases such as acne.

MUSCLES

Alcohol may lead to muscle weakness and muscle destruction.

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Public Health Service
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